

**Opening Statement
Of
Chairman Henry Hyde**

**Full Committee Hearing
“Redefining Boundaries: Political Liberalization in the Arab World”**

**2172 Rayburn House Office Building
April 21, 2005**

The Committee will come to order.

The purpose of today’s hearing is to hear from regional experts about the status of political liberalization and prospects for increased reform in a cadre of Arab countries, whose evolutionary political development plays a strategic role in determining the long-term march of democracy in the region.

The Arab world is diverse, representing twenty-two countries on both the Asian and African continents. Unfortunately, it would be impossible to discuss all of them here today. Therefore, the countries we will discuss include Algeria, Egypt, Syria and Saudi Arabia.

The selection of these countries was based on several factors: 1) We wanted to make sure to fairly represent the geographical diversity of the region; 2) It was important to expand the discourse on this issue, by discussing developments in countries with influence and historical leadership in the region for driving change; and 3) We wanted to assess the weight and role of “People Power” in the region’s political development. While, other Arab countries have made profound developments in reform, they are not necessarily the result of popular demand or domestic pressure and largely have been initiated by the ruling governments in power.

The Arab world today stands at a crossroads. Faced with three fundamental deficits in freedom, knowledge, and women’s rights, the current state of human development of the Arab people is a contradiction of their historical contributions and achievements that have been stepping stones to major advancements in western civilization.

The recently released *Arab Human Development Report* published by the United Nations Development Program, on freedom and good governance is the third in a series written by independent Arab scholars and contributes to an ongoing debate on the impediments to an Arab renaissance. It examines the level of freedom in the Arab world as a measure of progress for its development and states “[T]hat of all the impediments to an Arab renaissance, political restrictions on human development are the most stubborn.” Furthermore, it states that, “[E]stablishing a society of freedom and good governance requires comprehensive reform of governance at three interactive levels: internal, regional and global.”

The growing criticism of Arab governments by their own citizens and homegrown reform movements has led to an erosion of support of the status quo in the region. Arab governments are slowly coming to the realization that their broad base of support can no longer be sustained by the fuel of regional conflicts or the usual anti-Western rhetoric. Instead, Arab governments, under threat of losing their power, are coming to the realization that their legitimacy lies within the development of and investment in their own citizens.

Since the launch of the first *Arab Human Development Report*, there have been some internal initiatives and significant breakthroughs leading the way toward possible democratic trends. Several government-supported conferences focusing on reform have taken place, and efforts have been made in increasing citizen participation. For example, elections in Iraq, Palestine, and Saudi Arabia, and the recent announcement by President Mubarak that there will be a choice between multiple candidates in Egypt’s upcoming presidential elections, have created a sense that there are winds of change in the region.

External forces have also increased the discourse on political liberalization in the region. Since the tragic events of 9-11, the Administration has pursued a “forward strategy of freedom” to generate reform and democracy promotion in the Arab world. In addition to the millions of dollars spent in democracy and governance programs through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Middle East Partnership Initiative has been the primary vehicle to institute this change.

However, commitment to democratic progress requires an end to double-talk on the part of governments who act contrary to universal values and quell their citizens' socio-political expressions. As the President recently said in Brussels, "[Y]et while our expectations must be realistic, our ideals must be firm and they must be clear. We must expect higher standards from our friends and partners in the Middle East."

The United States also bears the responsibility of ensuring its credibility in this process. A perception that the United States only supports democratic change where it suits our strategic interests is damaging to our credibility and hinders our ability to work with Arab reformers, further undermining their efforts. By discussing in a forthright way the democratic development of our allies, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, the President should be able to make progress toward dealing with that perception: the Administration and the Congress need to follow up on our declaratory policies.

In addition, the Arab world is not monolithic. The United States needs to carefully craft country-specific strategies that are designed to engage with the realities on the ground.

We must not forget the significance of the reality of hope and access to capabilities has in transcending the limitations widespread in the region today. In June of 2002 this Committee held a hearing on the subject of economic development in the Middle East and the prospects for a Marshall Plan in the region. In that hearing, Rima Khalaf Hunaidi, the U.N. Assistant Secretary General, Assistant Administrator and Regional Director for the Regional Bureau for the Arab States, United Nations Development Program stated "[E]strangement and frustration arise not only when one is deprived of capabilities such as quality health and education, but also when one is deprived of the opportunity to use such capabilities in productive employment due to economic stagnation or legal biases, or when such capabilities are stifled by lack of freedoms or poor systems of governance."

I hope that governments in the region recognize that economic reforms alone will not liberate their people from lagging behind other developed nations. The private sector can play an

important role in revitalizing the economies of the area, but they need transparent and accountable governing institutions to create much needed opportunities.

A moment of truth has arrived, and Arabs must be the ones to lead the way toward the generational change that will help shape their future. We can only hope that governments in the region will heed internal calls for enhanced freedom. The present situation, which seeks to prevent an outbreak of instability and chaos through stifling individual thought, cannot be maintained and will inevitably lead to increased societal conflict as the *Arab Human Development Report* notes.

Leaders and governments who are afraid of engaging the visions and aspirations of their own people restrict the wave of collective talent that is the engine of human progress. The people of the Arab region are now experiencing the birth-pains of democracy and the sparks of what could be their own kindled renaissance. Will these sparks be stamped out by the jackboot of history, or will they be stoked and nurtured by those with the most to gain, as well as by those with the most to lose?

This is a dramatic and important time in the Arab world. This Committee and Congress should study the situation closely and do all they can to enable the development of indigenous homegrown democratic transformations. The future of the region will be in direct proportion to the freedom afforded to its people. Through a rediscovery of their own pluralistic tradition and applying these standards to the current social era, I believe that the Arab world will be successful in redefining its own boundaries and unleashing a wealth of enlightenment for future generations.

We have a distinguished panel of regional experts, and I look forward to their observations and ideas on ways the U.S. can benefit from current trends in the region in our endeavor to promote democracy.

I will now yield to my friend and colleague, Ranking Democratic Member Tom Lantos, for any opening remarks he may wish to make.